
THE SOUTH: REGION OR COLONY?

Benjamin B. Kendrick
and Marjorie S. Mendenhall

IN *Southern Regions** Howard W. Odum and his assistants have given a graphic picture of the Southeast in the early nineteen-thirties and have roughly blocked in the main outlines of another southern region—the Southwest. On the basis of the agreement of over seven hundred indices the Southeast was delimited to include the eleven states of Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana—a region corresponding fairly closely with the historical entity, the Old South. That such a picturization would be one largely of deficiencies we were quite prepared to admit. Indeed, on the basis of one-seventh as many similar indices, largely suggested by S. H. Hobbs' study of North Carolina, Angoff and Mencken made the identical point in a series of articles in the *American Mercury*, during the fall of 1931. But never before have the details and the sum of the deficiencies been specified so minutely. The peculiar values of the study are therefore the comprehensiveness and the exactitude with which the deficiencies are measured in relation to the same factors in other regions of the contemporaneous United States.

Southern Regions reminds us of nothing so much as of Harry Hammond's *Handbook of South Carolina* for 1883. Any disquietude aroused

**Southern Regions of the United States*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. \$4.00. A commentary, called *The Wasted Land*, has been written for the general public by Gerald W. Johnson and will be published in the near future. A manual for study classes has been prepared by Lee M. Brooks, Wayland J. Hayes, Harry E. Moore, and J. J. Rhyne, and will be on sale by May, 1937.

by the comparison should disappear with the realization that this is very good company in which to be. Although designed to set forth the advantages of the State for immigrants, Hammond's *Handbook*, while discharging this duty, had loftier purposes and became a veritable mine of information about South Carolina. Colyer Meriwether's comment upon it, with a few modifications, would be applicable to *Southern Regions*. The editor, said Meriwether, "gathered into one volume a wealth of information, historical, scientific, industrial, geographical, and general . . . Most of the articles were prepared by the best specialists, and the entire work is one of the most valuable publications ever issued by the State. It is the only general work of reference for the State, and is supplemented by a fine geological map. If the Department of Agriculture had never done more than this it would have amply paid for all it has cost the State."

The Southeastern people, according to Odum's survey, appear to be living in the midst of splendid natural resources which they have not translated into sufficient sustained productivity to keep the mass of the population at home, in good health and reasonable comfort, and with some hope for the future. Gerald Johnson, in *The Wasted Land*, which he describes as essentially a commentary on *Southern Regions*, has pointed to the tendency, before this study, to lose sight of the youth of the Southeastern population. The very small proportion of those over fifty-five, plus the large proportion of those under twenty, has led the commentator to describe the typical Southerner as a poor man with many children. The explanation is, of course, early marriages, large families, and the large proportion of emigrants of the productive age who leave the South to go to other regions. Woofter's figures and the excellent maps and charts—most of them by Waller Wynne—deal with interstate migration from 1900 to 1930. But as a matter of historical fact the problem is at least a century older. Out of the modern situation in relation to persistent unemployment in the nation at large Odum has drawn the warning that the nation will neither need nor welcome so large a supply of migrants from the Southeast as in the past. And from Johnson has come the sage remark that anyone who would formulate a program for the Southeast must devise it to appeal to a population different by virtue of the sharp definite factors of economic level and family responsibility.

Regions less rich than the Southeast have bountifully supported a much larger population. What is the matter, then, with the economy of the Southeast? How old the question! It has certainly been asked in the upper Southeast for a hundred years. And by now, how trite the answer! Agriculture, on which the people of the region mainly rely, is and has been badly in need of reform. Foreign commerce, so far as the region is concerned, has not, since early in the nineteenth century, left any appreciable residuum of wealth. And domestic commerce has developed relatively little or has suffered from arrested development. Finally, it seems that industry in the Southeast is too specialized to serve as a shock absorber for all the ills and inadequacies and misfortunes of Southern agriculture.

The picture, given in unique and extremely vital detail and implicit, if not specific, in the diagnosis which we have summarized, is sketched in a partial historical vacuum. And this is probably a virtue. We are inclined toward the view that, had the vacuum been more nearly perfect, the study would have possessed greater distinction than the large measure to which claim may justly be laid. This is spoken in no mood of subtle irony, for we believe that this was the progressive discovery of the director and reporter of the study. Had the exigencies of time and duties been less, he might have completed the exclusion. Nevertheless, despite the probable natural history of the evolution of the idea for the study, the final report bears the imprint of the earlier prepossession and must on this ground have a significance for the historian, and on this and other grounds have meaning for the economist and the alert Southerner.

Nowhere is the significance for the historian more obvious than in the device of contrasting sectionalism with regionalism to the discredit of the former. Such a distinction had important consequences, at least one of which was that local patriotism thereby tended to take on the aspect of chauvinism and greed. Another result was that a large portion of the South's spokesmen in the halls of Congress within the recent past must too easily fall into the category of demagogues. The repudiation of provincialism or the provincial attitude, either craven or arrogant, and whether based on calculating self-interest or on mere ignorance, is, we believe, a wise, necessary, and justifiable premise for a regional study. But sectionalism may be of too many types to be pitted against regionalism.

He would be blind indeed who would claim that the occasion never arises when self-interest must be asserted in order to adjust the balance of justice. Where would the work of Senator Joseph Weldon Bailey of Texas and of Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina in implementing the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1906 have been without such a motivation?

There seems to be no overwhelming necessity for this repudiation. Mr. Donald Davidson acutely suggests that if the reader will substitute the more fashionable word *region* for the word *section* in one of the more general passages in F. J. Turner's essay of twenty years ago he will have a description of the sort of nation that students of regionalism now believe the United States to be (*Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence*. Edited by Herbert Agar and Allen Tate).

Surveys of this sort suggest that there is room for a regionalism of the social sciences. So far as the United States is concerned, many people think that the possibility of a regionalism akin to local autonomy was dead by 1876, and that since that time we have had a sectional struggle for dominance. But if there be such a thing as regionalism, that is, a condition of integration rather than competition, then it is axiomatic that any particular region must have a past and a future peculiarly its own—a history and a goal—a tradition and a plan, if you will. The very idea presupposes a continuous identity—a tradition that cannot be ignored.

If the historians of the South could take hold of their task with a greater measure of vigor, the derivation of the Southern cultural tradition, for instance, would then not have to depend so largely, in the sociologists' hands, on the inadequate basis of romantic notions of "the folk" and the vivid but less mature early stages of Jefferson's ideas, generally denominated today as Jeffersonian. Almost any part of Jefferson's life is, of course, interesting. But Jefferson's entire career in Virginia, both as active protagonist and reflecting sage, is vital for the Southerner—that is, generally speaking, someone who, living in the South, or who, having been born there, would genuinely like to return, and who would attach himself to it in a sort of cultural continuity. These two stages of his life may hold the core of his consistency and the record of his revision. Yet, to mention two much publicized items of his social credo, who has told whether Jefferson made changes in his earlier views of cities as sores on the body politic

and in his earlier hostile view toward manufactures? That he did ultimately admit manufactures into the circle of his approval is testified by a letter to Benjamin Austin of Boston in 1816: "Experience has taught me that manufactures are now as necessary to our independence as to our comfort." Who knows Jefferson's relation to his contemporary agriculturists? Did his earlier glorification of the yeoman farmer receive no later revision? And just what did he believe about the relation of government to the general welfare? If we knew more about our great men, we might draw less upon the letter of their sayings and more upon the spirit of their lives, thus at once escaping rigidity in our thinking, and fusing their work into the general tradition. For there is a long continuous story of efforts toward reform in the South from the times of Jefferson to the present—a story that shows prunings and graftings and mutations, perhaps, but no gaps.

The mists that surround certain of the evolving patterns of Jefferson's kaleidoscopic personality are as nothing to those that surround Calhoun's. It seems to be the fashion for Southerners to repudiate that personality as a part of their cultural heritage. But how can one legitimately repudiate that which he does not know? Born and reared in a subregion of South Carolina where the inhabitants had been friendly to the British before the leaders of the coastal region sent their most persuasive envoys into the back country, successfully inducing the frontiersmen to accept a view of the British Constitution that hinged on the idea of the divisibility of sovereignty, Calhoun later dramatically projected—we all at least know this—the idea that sovereignty cannot be divided and inheres indelibly in the State. Did he draw this view from his earlier life, or did the Englishman Cooper, the lawyer and judge Smith, and the pamphleteer Turnbull, all perhaps tintured liberally with Blackstone, present it ready-made to a mind not unreceptive to legal ideas? What were his ideas on planting? On cotton? On manufactures? On commerce? And what was his attitude toward the important agricultural reform movement in South Carolina from 1839 to 1850? What did he do and say as President of the Pendleton Farmers' Society? What is the outline of his consistency and what were his revisions as he moved through his times? Was this man regional or provincial in his evolving attitudes? What relation did his views of the Federal land policy have to the waves of land-exploitation that suc-

cessively depleted the land and population of South Carolina? Do the problems of South Carolina in his day bear any analogy to Southern regional problems today? If the Southerner turns to the best biography that has been written on this important individual what does he find? If he reads the preface as well as the text he will be inclined to say that Meigs' biography was probably written to extenuate an injustice done to Calhoun in his preceding biography of Thomas Hart Benton!

How many Southerners know that Lee as President of Washington College thought his best services to a defeated people would be to expedite their instruction in agriculture? And how many know that in consequence of his views he set a committee to work to draw up plans for an agricultural course of study? And how many know that in doing so he was not originating something but giving expression to a line of thinking that had appeared amongst the best citizens in perhaps all of the states of the Old South but which had been relegated to the background by the processes of democracy and a fortuitous wave of prosperity that came in the 'fifties?

Not only have we failed to understand our great men; another difficulty encountered in a pilgrimage into the cultural past in search of a principle of "continuity and survival," is that the planters have been studied as owners of slaves rather than as rational beings deeply involved in the currents and problems of their day. A recent study is, perhaps, a harbinger of a new trend in history-writing on the Old South: we refer to *Scientific Interests in the Old South*, by Thomas Cary Johnson, Jr., in which a good case is made for the thesis that in the antebellum South "the attitude of genuine and eager interest in science was so widespread as to be all but universal among the southern people." The announcement that W. C. Coker in the near future will describe and evaluate the progress of natural science in the antebellum South bids fair to bring into the light a set of activities, interests, and accomplishments which may tie one branch of the enlightened planters' interests to an international as well as a national strain of culture.

Another of the rational interests of the exceptional planters lay in the field of the fine arts. Scattered evidences of participation in this interesting sector of civilized activity, both as artist and patron, are sufficient to justify the assertion that a study of planter activity along these lines

would probably yield a chapter in Southern history that would have continuing reality susceptible of absorption in Southern culture.

Three other phases of planter thought and action as yet largely unexplored may be mentioned as big with promise of an understanding of the planters' minds. They are (1) the attitudes toward systematic agriculture, (2) attitudes toward wealth and theories of wealth, and (3) attitudes toward the relation of government, particularly the state governments, to the question of the general welfare. The discovery that several groups of energetic planters faced problems, in many cases, similar to those that face us today, that they entertained the idea of a balanced economy, and that they urged the state government to sponsor agriculture, commerce, and manufactures, might challenge many a Southerner to a less ready repudiation of the whole of the Southern "tradition."

Most paradoxical to many would be the discovery that the idea of planning had occurred to these men and in at least one case was worked out to a more definite scheme than that finally broached in *Southern Regions*. The plan to which we refer was evolved for South Carolina in 1847 by Whitemarsh B. Seabrook, a sea-island planter. It was given before the State Agricultural Society on two occasions as "An Essay on the Agricultural Capabilities of South Carolina and the Best Means of Developing and Improving Them." After a preliminary examination of the natural resources or agricultural capabilities of South Carolina, climate, soil, crops, minerals, game and fish, and fruits and vegetables, Seabrook divided South Carolina into three zones and pointed out "the course which circumstances admonish the agriculturists of each to pursue."

In the alluvial zone it was thought wise to continue a dependence on the staples: rice, sea-island cotton, short staple cotton, and lumber. But the planters were admonished to let these be considered net gain, the expenses of the plantation to be defrayed from other products or interest on capital. Holding that the almost universal belief of that time in the overproduction of cotton was untenable, this man who was to be Governor of the State in 1850 correctly prophesied that the time seemed near when raw materials for European consumption would be drawn wholly from the southern United States. To the two factors usually thought to be directly related to

the quantity of cotton that could be grown in the United States he added another—the improved skill of the grower.

For the middle zone he urged that the commercial production of cotton and wheat be equalized, thus, as he pointed out, reducing the number of acres in cotton. In the third zone, the first of a series of measures essential to reform was asserted to be the total abandonment of cotton as a market crop. In the place of cotton it was suggested that wheat be looked upon as the clear profit crop and that the other cereals and the grasses be taken over as a basis for sheep husbandry and the “permanent improvement of estates.” In addition it was proposed that a part of the cultural capital of the zone be diverted to other pursuits—manufactures and local commerce.

Seabrook thought that four agents ought of necessity to participate in the reform basic to a revival of prosperity in that state: education, the associated effort of the tillers of the soil, the multiplication and improvement of the means of internal transportation, and legislative patronage. In discussing these, observations were made on the free school system, which he thought defective; South Carolina College; agricultural education; agricultural fairs; local agricultural societies; public roads; railroads; manufacturers (here he spoke of the fifteen cotton factories in the State, and of their spindles and looms and of the type of legislative patronage in vogue in the Middle and New England States); and a specific proposal for legislative patronage of agriculture in South Carolina.

Approaching the subject in a third way, the essayist proposed that the fertility of the soils of the State be restored by deep plowing, thorough draining, high manuring, and judicious rotation, and that new areas of rich land be made available by the draining of the swamps, both inland and river. To bring the pine lands into the productive column Seabrook proposed that lime be added to the soil and Bermuda grass pastures be developed where the lumber trade could not be brought into play. Interestingly enough, this able man did not propose a further introduction of blooded cattle but urged instead proper care and development of the local stocks, which he thought quite equal to the demands for meat and manure. (In 1850 South Carolina and the South in general had a larger number of livestock per capita than did the North.)

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His plan for the diversification of the industrial pursuits of the people called for a new type of investment. Seabrook asserted that at that time the private surplus income of the citizens of the State was disposed of in modes of no essential practical benefit to the public and that many agriculturists had become bondholders and stockowners in subjection to irresponsible power. How prophetic of Berle and Means' *Modern Corporation and Private Property*! In place of these investments of doubtful public utility he proposed the development of manufactures, the enlargement of foreign commerce, and the development of a variety of types of domestic commerce. To the excessive reliance of the population on manual labor he gave a due measure of hostile criticism, and to the proposed use of steam and running streams as motive power a similar amount of enthusiastic approval.

The spirit of the essay can best be left with the reader in two short quotations.

How then may the wealth and success of this state be best promoted? By the culture of a single product of the soil? No! Exclusive devotion to strictly agricultural duties? Far from it. To the merchant, the manufacturer, the mechanic, we must extend the right hand of fellowship. Each is dependent on the others, and to be able fully to appreciate the onward progress of one another, is to be certain that all the elements of society are working together harmoniously and beneficially.

And again:

That a community can reach the goal of prosperity by the cultivation of a single staple, the history of South Carolina agriculture very satisfactorily attests; but if her products had been variant, that the deterioration of her lands, should such have been the result, would have been slower, and her general condition more encouraging, there are solid grounds for believing. If, however, with the lights now before us, her agricultural system be not radically changed, it will become a question, if it be not already one, whether the cotton culture has been to her a blessing or a curse.

If the appearance of *Southern Regions* may act as a gadfly to the historian, it can also stimulate the economist and the economic historian. Why are interest rates disproportionately high in the South? And why are so

many of the most interesting installments in the story of the evolution of Southern commerce missing? What is the explanation for the decline of Southern direct trade with Europe? An interesting story lies hidden there, or the essays of Maury, Trenholm, Cardozo, and De Bow are will-o'-the-wisps. And why, when the story of Southern transportation was summarized in *Southern Regions*, did the writer have to leave the story of Southern railroads hanging in the air at 1860, jumping from that point directly to the subject of highways? Has he never seen the post-Civil War statement by a group of railway directors of an intention to turn the lines of Southern railway transportation north and south as opposed to their former tendency to run east and west? And does he think the persistent Southern complaint in Washington against the point-basing system and differentials and the whole rate structure just a confirmed Southern habit of grumbling?

This incessant grumbling of a considerable group of Southern leaders cries out for analysis. The need is double. Why has there been so persistent a complaint against an imputed colonial status and its corollary of exploitation? And there is need that the South discover what efforts have been made by the leaders of the region toward reform through Southern efforts. The first task can best be assumed by the economist. The second is the peculiar responsibility of the historian. Somewhat diffidently we would project here the high lights of the story of the development of the Southern tradition of reforms, a story which has been told before in parts but not as a whole.

As has been suggested before, reform as a Southern movement—not necessarily in isolation, far from it in fact—is an old story and a continuous one. It began perhaps with Thomas Jefferson. But the period between Jefferson and the Alliance movement, so little understood, represents no hiatus in the movement. There were antebellum reformers in the Southern states. And they were men of affairs or of intellectual interests. They worked through agricultural societies, institutes, and conventions. And their demands were multiple. They not only resisted what appeared to them to be the engrossing tendencies of outsiders bent on their own advantage, but they formulated programs of reform and presented them to their state legislatures and to the general public. The improvement of agriculture, the diversification of occupations, better schools, better bank-

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ing or credit facilities, and resistance to the development of an unhealthy capitalism in its aspects of concentration and irresponsibility were their main points of attack.

After the War these old leaders revived their instruments of propaganda and reform, but the currents of life at that time had become much more complex and less amenable to old techniques. The Federal Government had become for some a possible instrument of reform, and many who had been quick to admit the supremacy of the national as opposed to the federal idea began, as soon as their disabilities were removed, to work for such things as the establishment of the Department of Agriculture in the Federal Government, and for a change in the national banking laws. In the meantime the small farmers, who had shown a few signs of interest in reform before the Civil War, became actively interested in reform, and under the leadership of the younger hold-over reform leaders, they were ushered into the Grange or Patrons of Husbandry. The members of that organization, while coöperating freely with the national set-up, put most of their energies on typical Southern problems—forerunners of those that were pivotal in the succeeding Alliance movement, for which the old Grangers formed a nucleus. One outstanding leader, who had been in antebellum days the secretary of the South Carolina agricultural society, after the War became again trebly active in reform as secretary of the revived state society, member of the executive committee of the national Patrons of Husbandry, and Congressman, active in the ultimately successful move to establish a Federal Department of Agriculture. It is an odd yet explicable thing that the outstanding feature in Granger activity in the Northwest, namely the curbing of the railroads through state railway commissions, had no counterpart in the Granger movement in the South, of which, by the way, the story is yet untold. The first Southern movement in the direction of railway regulation which we have yet uncovered was made by the venerable but fiery Robert Toombs of Georgia, who in 1876 came out of a self-imposed retirement from both state and federal politics to secure a railway commission for Georgia.

The story of reform from this point is fairly well known. In outline it went something like this: the rise of the Farmers' Alliance in the South; its spread to the West; the turn of the movement toward politics; influence

of the Alliance partly in the Populist Party and partly in the Democratic Party; the appearance of two wings in the Democratic Party; Bryan and defeat; the reform movement almost lost in the exuberance of the New South movement but occasionally raising its head, generally in concert with the West, to demand such things as the Sherman Anti-Trust Law, modification of the National Banking Act, a strengthened Interstate Commerce Commission, the direct election of senators, the income tax amendment, and a Federal Trade Commission (typical of the persistence of the Southern movement for reform after Bryan was the concord which Senator Newlands in his papers described as having arisen between himself and John Sharp Williams); and then, the low-water mark of the 'twenties with the revival of the Grange near the end of the decade to displace certain intermediate farm organizations.

At the same time the story takes a new turn, for an apparent mutation appeared in the form of the ideas associated with the Nashville Agrarians. That group of Southern intellectuals who placed themselves in the mid-current of the Southern reform movement at first provoked levity as well as interest. Many who read their works were charmed but mystified. Many wished them luck but dismissed them as not a force to be reckoned with.

But meanwhile in all parts of the United States another group of reformers, who, as we all know, are so often conservatives, raised their voices against the evils of monopoly capitalism. Characteristic explanations and expositions of their views were put before the public by Berle and Means in *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*, and by Herbert Agar in *Land of the Free*. Both the Agrarians and the opponents of finance capitalism were looking for allies. It was perhaps inevitable that they should get together. The alliance seems to be signalized by the appearance of *Who Owns America?*

Out of that confederation comes an idea of Southern regionalism stronger than that of the Agrarians and possessed, if we do not mistake it, of a powerful dynamic. That seems to be what John Crowe Ransom is saying in the remark,

the South, by virtue of being moved by a tradition, is capable of bringing passion to the support of a policy which other regions begin to come to by rational and somewhat distrusted processes. That is

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why the South may be a valuable accession to the scattering and unorganized party of all those who think it is time to turn away from the frenzy of Big Business toward something older, more American, and more profitable.

This is the only form of Southern regionalism which to us seems to have a past and a future, a tradition and a plan, an ingrown strength and an outgoing power. It is the only form of regionalism proposed in the United States which bears any definite resemblance to that classic example of regionalism, the Irish reform movement, which we are told received its original impetus from Mrs. Green, the English historian's wife, and which centered about such men as Russell, Yeats, and Sir Horace Plunkett.

Its advocates, in proposing the revival of small responsible properties, make it clear that they are not suggesting a mere back-to-the-land movement and that they are not proposing a return to technologically inferior modes of manufacture. But they do hold that the present state of the farmer in the South and the other regions of the United States is not an example of the good features of agrarian life, and that finance capitalism is morally ugly as well as economically unsound.

This latest development in Southern regionalism crystallized either contemporaneously with, or after, the appearance of *Southern Regions*, and so it is impossible to present adequately Odum's attitude to this body of thought. His position is rather cryptic. If his Middle States had been called the New East, for instance, as it well might have been on the basis of the great development of manufactures and the decrease of farms—to draw from his indices—then it might be described thus: there is no South, no East, no West; there are two Souths, two Easts, two Wests.

Yet sufficient evidence exists to permit an estimate of the viewpoint of *Southern Regions* in relation to the general subject of regionalism. From that angle it can be said without much qualification that little or no sympathy is shown toward what is currently known as regionalism. The tradition of the Old South is repudiated. Sectionalism is repudiated without examination. And, as would be expected, Odum shows little sympathy with the Agrarians, referring to their "nostalgic yearnings," for instance, and to "an ideological motivation for an abstract agrarian culture" as the opposite of effective. But he himself presents no general plan as a goal for

future efforts and no suggestions of ways and means to arrive at any ideal that may be evolved by, for instance, the planning board which he suggests—a group to be supported, it is inferred, by a foundation.

Beyond this negative aspect what his attitude is must remain something of a question. He may be confused at the moment, as so many of us are. He may be cautious. But in so far as *Southern Regions* presents a viewpoint it approximates that of the “New South” advocates of the 1890’s. He emphasizes the need of outside help in both leaders and capital. It is interesting that on the matter of leaders Gerald Johnson has thought it necessary to qualify this attitude. As to the need of capital there can be no doubt. But we recall that claims have been made that a region can supply its capital endogenously. (There is apparently incontrovertible evidence that the original development of manufactures in the South was with local capital. Whether the outside capital which was subsequently attracted was a benefit or an evil is a debatable question.) In the attitude of inviting capital the Agrarian would sense an invitation to the investor with a speculative turn. Furthermore, the Agrarian would question the whole set-up of aid from the foundations on the ground that the funds were derived in the first place from an exploitation of the possibilities of finance manipulation. Odum says there is no South. The Agrarian would say that it is on the verge of occupying a colonial status with reference to the Northeast. Odum most frequently gives immaturity and lag as an explanation of the South’s deficiencies without further explanation of the cause of this lag. The Agrarian would be quick to sense an implication in this position. Odum calls the ’twenties crest years of achievement and the beginnings of recession whereas the Agrarian would probably think them wholly years of recession.

These examples of contrasting points of view are sufficient to indicate that thoughtful Southerners do not all see eye to eye with respect to the content and objectives of regionalism. With whose ideology the future lies we have not the hardihood to prognosticate.